



EFFECTIVENESS OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

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“For most of history Anonymous was a woman.”-Virginia Woolf

ABSTRACT

Women face violence inside and outside the family throughout their lives. Most women in India have very little say in decisions affecting their own lives. The cumulative effect of all this is that women tend to lack the self-confidence and skills needed to function effectively in the public sphere. . The under representation of women and absence of women from positions of power and decision-making reinforces their exploitation and deprivation. It is in this context that women's greater political representation become more necessary. The Indian Constitution guarantees to all women the fundamental right to equality(Article 14) and equal voting rights and political participation to both men and women. As reflected in the Preamble, the Indian Constitution is firmly grounded in the principles of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice and contains a number of provisions for the empowerment of women. The political rights of women are recognized without any discrimination, or distinction and they have the right to participate in decision making at all levels equally with men. The right to constitutional equality has been supplemented by legal equality by the passage of a number of Acts through which the traditional inequalities in respect of marriage, divorce and property rights are sought to be eliminated. However, in spite of these constitutional and legal provisions, the ground reality is that women have not obtained adequate and proportionate representation in the legislative and other decision making. Along with this the importance of women's economic independence, education and awareness and their improvement in the socio economic sphere can hardly be stressed. The restructuring of gender relations within both the family and society is an equally important step towards freedom, equality and justice.

Keywords: Women, politics, gender, participation, history, legislative, Indian constitution

INTRODUCTION

The nature of society or state has a decisive impact on the extent and effectiveness of women's political presence and participation. Notions of democracy, governance and the state are often not gender neutral constructs but result from both historical factors and experiences. The state and its organizational entities reflect the same social forces as other social organizations. It is thus necessary to examine the gender balance in women's participation in the political process, decision making and policy formulation. There are historical, social and cultural factors that have limited women's capacity and chances to exercise their freedom to participate in the political processes. The evolution of Indian democracy through the 14 general elections so far has reflected a low representation of women in Parliament, State legislatures, in political parties and other decision-making bodies.

The representation of women in the political sphere is inextricably linked with the low and inferior status of women in society in India especially in the context of the declining sex ratio increasing violence and crimes against women and their marginalized status in employment, education and health sectors.(Human Development in South Asia:2000). The comparative position of gender-



related development index (GDI) reveals that among 177 countries, India ranks 113th, indicating its very low gender-equity status as evident.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN IN POLITICS:

Women in India raised the issue of representation in politics first in 1917. At that time it was basically a demand for universal adult franchise and political participation. By 1930 women had gained the Right to vote, which initially benefited women from elite families. The effectiveness of women's participation also depends on the local configuration of power and cultural environment apart from problems of poverty, illiteracy, lack of economic resources, negative social and legal environments, family and household pressures, male dominated bureaucracy and politicians that the women face.

The Indian Constitution guarantees to all women the fundamental right to equality(Article 14) and equal voting rights and political participation to both men andwomen. As reflected in the Preamble, the Indian Constitution is firmly groundedin the principles of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice and contains a numberof provisions fortheempowermentofwomen.Thepoliticalrightsofwomenarerecognizedwithout any discrimination, or distinction and they have the right to participate in decision making at all levels equally with men. The right to constitutional equality has been supplemented by legal equality by the passage of a number of Acts through which the traditional inequalities in respect of marriage, divorce and property rights are sought to be eliminated. However, in spite of these constitutional and legal provisions, the ground reality is that women have not obtained adequate and proportionate representation in the legislative and other decision-makingbodies.There is certainly a need for women's more effective role in decision-making processes for the democratic and constitutional.

Assurances of equal citizenship and rights in the Indian Constitution to become a reality at the operational level.

During the National Movement against colonialism women were mobilized actively particularly under Gandhi's leadership and women's organizations within the political parties participated actively in the cause against colonialism for instance in the Civil Disobedience Movements and Salt Satyagraha etc. But once freedom was won, the women's wings were more or less marginalized and assigned areas that primarily dealt with women and children or other 'welfare' activities and women's organizations ended up playing Foundation Course Human Rights, Gender and Environment a secondary and supportive role to the male leadership in power. The leaders of such organizations were seldom women with independent political careers unless they were from political families with the backing of male political activists. It is worth noting that the political mobilization of women and their participation in elections has steadily increased since the first General Elections of 1952.

Among women who manage to rise in the political echelons, in spite of their



ability in administration and the art of political articulation, very few women reach the level of cabinet ministers. Mostly they remain deputy ministers or ministers of state. When women reach the few ministerial positions, they are generally assigned Foundation Course Human Rights, Gender & Environment portfolios in the social service sectors of Health, Education, Social Welfare, Women and Child Development etc.(Human Development in South Asia:2000) By the 1980s, issues raised by the women's movements in India led to political parties realizing the importance of female voters and women's wings became active. Mainstream political parties became conscious of women as a constituency and this was reflected in their election manifestoes and their considering women as candidates with potential votes. By the ninth Lok Sabha elections in 1989, one could find a conscious focus on women's issues in the manifestoes of political parties. More recently major political parties have indeed made a conscious effort to induct more women into the various levels of the party organization. The CPM has made an effort to induct more women into its district committees and state level bodies.

On the other hand, in reality women have been active and vocal both in times of peace and crisis. They have been active in movements of peace, women and child welfare, trade unionism, food adulteration, price rise and deforestation and many other issues.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

In any case women's involvement in nationalist struggles changed their lives in that even though they were denied equal opportunities to shape the new state, they gained constitutional and legal rights. But even after the right to vote became a reality for all women, their representation in the parliament, political parties and other decision making bodies remained low even after independence, and after the Indian Constitution came into force in 1950. (Susheela Kaushik:1993:1996, Veena Mazumdar:1993).

The percentage of women in legislatures and decision making positions always remained low. Women do not share the power of decision-making and are not involved in policy making in Indian democracy in proportion to their numerical strength. Thus there is a gap between the formal idea of women's participation and their meaningful use of power.(Susheela Kaushik:1993).

The quest for greater political representation of women is, therefore, still relevant.(Asha Kapur Mehta et al:2001) Almost all political parties set up a women's cell or wing but they worked as ancillary bodies. Very few women were able to capture seats of power. The number of women in the legislatures remained very small. Very few women reached the position of party president or leader of legislative party. (Ranjana Kumari:1994).

The BJP had the highest percentage of women in decision-making bodies from the Parliamentary Board and the Election Committee down to the ward level. (Rita Manchanda:1998 The number of women candidates in the 1998 parliamentary elections was not even half the number of women in the 1996 elections. In 1998 there were only 274 women candidates as against 599 in the 1996 elections. In the general elections in 1999, the same proportion of women were put up for elections by



both the parties favoring the 84th Amendment Bill on the reservation for women in Parliament and the parties which were opposed to it.(Rita Manchanda:1998). The Congress Party led by a woman had only 10% of women among the candidates. The BJP and the CPM had 7% of women among the candidates.(Jayati Ghosh:1999).

WOMEN IN POLITICS TODAY:

The real reason for the low political representation of women in the formal political structures and decision making levels, seems to lie in the compulsions of competitive elections and the quest for power by the political parties in a multiparty democracy. Increasingly the compulsions of the political parties due to narrow majorities, precarious coalitions and hung parliaments have made the question of power rather than that of representation the determining factor. Women's issues and women's participation and representation are encouraged only within the parameters of power and are constrained by the basic objectives and interest of the parties either to capture power or survival, if in power. Thus the Indian political system cannot be said to be non-receptive to the emergence and dominance of women leaders even though the political representation of women has not particularly registered a significant increase over the last 14 general elections. While on the one hand most women politicians have found it difficult to rise within male dominated party hierarchies, on the other hand some women have managed to become leaders when they have set up parties of their own. Once they have established themselves as leaders, there has been an unquestioning acceptance of their leadership and decisions by the party rank and file, even if it is largely male.

Along with this the importance of women's economic independence, education and awareness and their improvement in the socio economic sphere can hardly be stressed. The restructuring of gender relations within both the family and society is an equally important step towards freedom, equality and justice. With only 11 per cent of representation of women in Lok Sabha and 10.7 per cent in Rajya Sabha, India ranks 105th in the world, according to the latest comparative data released by the



Inter-Parliamentary Union, an international organisation that works for promoting democracy in the world. India, the world's largest democracy, has only 60 women lawmakers in the current 543-member Lok Sabha, while there are 24 women MPs out of 240 members in Rajya Sabha at present. Two seats in Lok Sabha and five in the Upper House have been lying vacant.

While India shares the 105th position with West African country Cote d'Ivoire, it is ranked 85 places below Nepal and 53 places behind Pakistan. Even China at 60th spot and Bangladesh at 65 are well above India. Only Sri Lanka and Myanmar are the neighbouring countries which are placed below India at 129 and 134 spots in the list respectively. This sordid picture of women's participation in politics in the country has led women activists to demand greater political representation and call for the passage of the bill that promises 33 per cent reservation to women in Parliament.

Among the countries that have higher women participation in national politics included Andorra, a small landlocked country in southwestern Europe, which is ranked second with over 50 per cent women legislators. Rich and powerful countries like the US, Britain, Italy, France and Germany are ranked 78th, 53rd, 57th, 69th and 21st respectively. There are eight countries -- such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Belize, Palau, Micronesia, Nauru and Solomon Islands -- which have zero women participation in their national politics.

CONCLUSION:

It is important to stress that like the equal right to vote, participation and representation in legislative bodies may not in itself be enough for women's political empowerment or to remedy the problems of discrimination faced by women in Indian society. While the steady increase in the electoral participation and mobilization of women in India has increased the visibility of women in the legislative politics this has not happened in the exercise of executive and judicial power due to their lack of presence in the decision making structures.

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